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EPA updates Kalamazoo River cleanup ; Some say there has been too much study, not enough action on 80-mile expanse

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PLAINWELL -- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency representatives offered an update Wednesday night on the work they plan for this year and in coming years to clean up the 80-mile Kalamazoo River Superfund site.

But to many in the audience in a conference room of a Plainwell hotel, the presentation was mostly talk with little action.

"This is pretty much their standard stuff," said Gary Wager, executive director of the Kalamazoo River Cleanup Coalition.

The presentation, attended by about 40 people, was "discouraging," Wager said, because it appears that the only company currently paying for the cleanup, Atlanta-based papermaker **Georgia-Pacific** LLC, is being allowed to conduct more studies rather than remove harmful polychlorinated biphenyls from the river.

Banned chemical

Polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, were dumped in the river, or in nearby landfills that leaked, by paper mills during the recycling of carbonless copy paper. The chemical, which was banned in 1979, is considered a likely human carcinogen.

The EPA's update Wednesday focused on the status of studies of the Kalamazoo River and Portage Creek and ongoing work at several landfills.

Weyerhaeuser Co., a wood products firm based in Washington state, is expected to complete construction of a cap over the 12th Street Landfill in Plainwell.

Georgia-Pacific is expected to begin work this year to cap one of two landfills along the river in Comstock Township. The company is expected to begin work to cap the second landfill next year.

Meanwhile, **Georgia-Pacific** this month finished its investigation of PCB contamination in the stretch of river from the dam at Morrow Lake to Plainwell -- what the EPA calls Area 1.

"Later next year we'll have a decision on what remaining work will be done in Area 1," said Jim Saric, the EPA's project manager for the Kalamazoo River Superfund site.

And the company this year is beginning a similar investigation on Area 2, the stretch of river from Plainwell to Otsego. The results of that examination could be finished by the fall 2012, Saric said.

Seven areas

There are seven areas in the 80-mile Superfund site.

"There was no comment from anywhere (during the presentation) to push **Georgia-Pacific** on doing some real cleanup work," Dayle Harrison, president of the Kalamazoo River Protection Association, said after Wednesday's meeting.

Studies of the extent of pollution in the river -- a first step before a cleanup plan can be agreed to -- are a "delaying action," Harrison said.

Also on Wednesday, Michael Berkoff, the EPA's project manager for the landfill portions of the site, said the agency's recommendation for cleanup of the Allied Paper Landfill in Kalamazoo should be released to the public in June.

The agency is considering options for the 1.5 million cubic yards of PCB-contaminated material buried in the 80-acre area off Alcott Street near in the Milwood neighborhood. Two of the options involve leaving the material in place and one option would remove it.

The Kalamazoo River Cleanup Coalition, formed in 2007 to oppose the dumping of additional PCBs at the site, wants all the PCBs removed.

"It's fairly clear to me -- if I had to bet on it -- the EPA is going to select 'waste in place,'" Wager said.

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